

How do you Solve a Problem like (North) Korea

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This week saw the most recent ballistic missile test on the Korean peninsula. We outline below four key questions about what happened, why it matters, how the US will respond, and what happens next. The North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile programmes highlight the limits of coercive diplomacy and raise the possibility that the US President Donald Trump might be forced, unless (and even if) he tries to reinvigorate negotiations, to accept a nuclear deterrence relationship with North Korea, alongside a strategy of containment and covert action.

What happened?

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, more commonly known as North Korea) tested a ballistic missile in the early hours of Tuesday morning, which reportedly travelled [a distance of nearly 600 miles in about thirty-seven minutes](#). Together with the missile's [lofted trajectory of 1,700 miles](#), this performance has prompted experts to claim the test as a significant development in the North Korean ballistic missile programme, representing a capability at or near intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) range, potentially threatening as far as Alaska.

Why does it matter?

North Korea has been [testing ballistic missiles for decades](#). It has also [developed and tested nuclear devices since 2006](#). Events this week do not mean that North Korea has suddenly developed a deliverable nuclear deterrent: experts believe that North Korea already has a small number of nuclear warheads and the means to launch them into the Republic of Korea ('South Korea') or even Japan. The reason this week's test was significant is that it implies a significant step change in the range of North Korea's nuclear deterrent and its ability to threaten the United States directly.

Development of such a capability does not, of course, signal an intention to use it. In fact, the most obvious strategic justification for long-standing North Korean efforts to acquire a nuclear deterrent is that this capability would increase the security of the regime by deterring US military action against it. The plausibility of this argument is implicit in most of this week's coverage of US President Donald Trump's limited range of options for the 'pretty severe things' his administration is contemplating in response to the latest test. Most commentators agree that the risks of preventive military strikes are already too great, because of North Korea's current ability to deliver nuclear, biological, chemical or simply massive conventional counter-strikes against South Korea and Japan.

Put simply, North Korean thinking is that the stronger its deterrent, the less likely the Kim dynasty will be to follow the Hussein or Gaddafi dynasties into the dustbin of dictatorship history. It's not difficult to see why this is a persuasive argument in Pyongyang. As the then US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper [said in October 2016](#), denuclearization is '*probably a lost cause*' as North Korea sees its nuclear deterrent as its '*ticket to survival*'.

If the North Korean nuclear programme is purely defensive, you might argue, what's the problem? Optimists about nuclear proliferation have made similar arguments in the past, pointing to the unprecedented period of relative peace between great powers in the nuclear era. In contrast, more pessimistic voices highlight the outsized risks of nuclear proliferation, especially in the case of smaller, poorer regimes of questionable stability and technical competence in safeguarding their respective nuclear arsenals from accidental or unauthorised use. For example, has Kim, fearing a pre-emptive US strike, delegated responsibility to more junior commanders to use existing biological, chemical or nuclear weapons to retaliate against South Korea? We don't know, but this possibility increases the escalatory risks of any potential US preventive strike.

Aside from the risks of nuclear accident or spiral of escalatory conflict, a North Korean nuclear capability to attack the continental US could reduce the credibility of its nuclear umbrella protection of allies like South Korea and Japan. Might this spark a regional

arms race, encouraging South Korea and Japan to develop their own respective nuclear deterrents? If it does not, Kim Jong-un might feel emboldened to take more provocative or adventurist actions, *e.g.* further moves against any perceived rivals or enemies abroad, like the recent [assassination, using a nerve agent, of Kim's half-brother in Malaysia](#). North Korea already acts like a pariah state, but its acquisition of a deterrent against the US might encourage it to act even more provocatively.

This week's missile test does not mean that North Korea possesses such a capability today. It is probably several years away from being able to launch a nuclear-armed ICBM attack on the US at any scale, but its rapid recent and likely future progress suggest that it will eventually develop this capability, absent a fundamental shift in underlying factors – not least on-going US-led efforts to counter this programme.

How will the US respond?

North Korea's very pursuit of a deterrent against US military action has sparked deliberations in Washington about whether preventive strikes might be feasible. The reason for this is simple: successive US administrations have expressed firm commitment to a denuclearized Korean peninsula and have repeatedly stated the unacceptability of a North Korean nuclear deterrent that threatens the United States.

The US has long pursued five parallel lines of policy towards North Korea:

1. The [large and long-standing US military commitment to South Korea and Japan](#), including a recent enhancement of South Korean missile defences with the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Aerial Defense (THAAD) system. THAAD is not uncontroversial: South Korean President Moon Jae-in has [temporarily delayed its deployment](#) amidst domestic concerns, whilst [China and Russia fear THAAD's implications](#) for their own nuclear-armed missiles.
2. [Over 25 tortuous years of post-Cold War US-North Korea diplomacy](#). Various inducements, including food and economic assistance, have been offered to North Korea in return for abandonment or at least suspension of its nuclear and

missile programmes. These talks require the US to collaborate closely with its allies – most systematically as part of the 2003-09 six-party talks (between the US, North Korea, South Korea, China and Japan) – but have been marred by mistrust and bad faith. For example, President Obama tried to broker a deal for a North Korean test moratorium in February 2012, just two months after Kim Jong-un assumed office, only for the deal to be wrecked by a North Korean satellite launch the following April.

3. In the absence of diplomatic progress, the US leads international efforts to (patchily) implement economic sanctions on North Korea, but progressive advances of North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile programmes underline the limitations of this coercive diplomacy. As part of this and the broader diplomatic process, the US has tried repeatedly to encourage China to intervene more effectively to change Kim's course of action, assuming that China has greater influence over the regime, if only it were willing to use it.
4. Since at least the second term of the Obama administration, the US has reportedly pursued a 'left of launch' cyber programme to disrupt North Korean ballistic missile tests, to say nothing of the possibility of other, still-as-yet unreported covert activities against the regime.
5. The US has long invested in national missile defence, developing a controversial (because very expensive and of currently questionable efficacy) programme of interceptor missiles.

This patchwork of overlapping measures has not prevented continued development of North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities. A former US under secretary of state for arms control, Robert Joseph, wrote earlier this week about continuities in North Korea policy across the three most recent US administrations: whilst *'their rhetoric has differed markedly, all three presidents have accepted the same basic assumptions and employed the same economic and diplomatic tools with the same results.'* What then are President Trump's options? His national security apparatus is reportedly considering a range of possible

[responses](#), including last-resort military action. The problem, as Ankit Panda and Vipin Narang [wrote yesterday](#), is that the *‘window for thinking about disarming North Korea by force without guaranteeing millions of fatalities has probably long closed.’*

A preventive strike should be rejected because of the potential for escalation and massive casualties. Mr Trump is therefore left with various options that resemble amplified versions of his predecessors’ diplomatic strategies, commencing with Trump’s first six months spent in conversations about North Korea with South Korea, Japan and China. Now, like Mr Obama in 2009, Trump has witnessed a fresh North Korean missile test early in his presidency. The administration should respond by continuing to improve defensive and deterrent responses to North Korea’s nuclear arsenal, as well as exploring options for more vigorous covert action to undermine North Korean weapons programmes.

Mr Trump should also commit fully to a fresh exploration of whether negotiations could be resumed along the lines of the six-party talks. He is likely to find a [more willing partner in newly-elected South Korean President Moon Jae-in](#) than any counterpart Mr Obama had in Seoul. This changed dynamic could be important, but there are good reasons to be sceptical about the prospects for successful diplomacy, including genuine doubt about North Korean good faith and whether there is an agreement to be negotiated that would be acceptable to both Mr Trump and Kim Jong-un.

North Korea appears determined to retain its status as a nuclear-weapons state, so much so that it [wrote its nuclear status into the North Korean constitution in 2012](#). US insistence on a North Korean commitment to denuclearization before negotiations restart is therefore likely to guarantee that talks won’t happen. If Mr Trump were to waive this precondition, there is still the issue of the price of any deal – a combination of economic assistance, security guarantees, improved political and trade relations, even a formal peace treaty – that would persuade North Korea to suspend its nuclear and missile tests. Could Mr Trump make such a deal? Would he even want to? He would encounter strong domestic political resistance, but as Leon Sigal [noted earlier this year](#),

the longer the US delays new talks, 'the greater the North's bargaining leverage will be' – a point underlined by this week's missile test.

Shifting gears on denuclearization, could the US accept some form of nuclear deterrence relationship with North Korea? The two states have sustained a relationship of conventional deterrence since 1953, and North Korea's first nuclear test was in 2006, so this provides some evidence that North Korea is amenable to the logic of rational deterrence. However, this may be a concession too far for Mr Trump, who would risk the political legacy of being the president who let North Korea finally develop a weapon capable of threatening the US. A president rhetorically committed to '[so much winning, you'll get tired of winning](#)' is unlikely to warm to a policy easily depicted as losing.

Apart from political feasibility, there are legitimate doubts about whether a nuclear deterrence relationship with North Korea is a desirable outcome for America and the wider world. Although there is an argument that [North Korea has been a more rational actor than many give it credit for](#), the Kim regime is also aggressive, insular and paranoid. Adding nuclear-armed ICBMs to the mix is a recipe for severe concern, whether regarding deliberate actions, nuclear accidents or miscalculation. Surely no-one is keen to replay the Cuban Missile Crisis, casting Trump and Kim as Kennedy and Khrushchev?

The problem is that there may not be much of a choice. President Obama's approach of coercive diplomacy and covert action – sanctions and sabotage – probably slowed the rate of North Korea's progress, but reducing the speed of progress is not an effective curb on future development. Of course, Mr Trump should intensify these efforts. He should also explore new ways to counter the North Korean regime's information war on its own people. But sanctions, information operations and covert action are unlikely to bring about swift regime change.

The North Korean regime has demonstrated considerable resilience. It is unwise to bet on the Kim regime imploding under the weight of its own pathologies any time soon. If Mr Trump fails to restart fresh negotiations and secure a test suspension, it is only a

matter of time before North Korea crosses the red line of developing a reliable capability to threaten the continental United States with nuclear attack. The cost of intervening militarily is already too high. The price and feasibility of a deal are unknowable without renewed talks, but the diplomatic well has been poisoned by the failure of previous negotiations. In the meantime, containment and deterrence are Mr Trump's only options.

Who knows what comes next?

As the late Kenneth Waltz once argued, *'no country will press a nuclear nation to the point of decisive defeat. In the desperation of defeat, desperate measures may be taken, and the last thing anyone wants to do is to make a nuclear nation desperate.'* Assuming that North Korea has a survivable second-strike capability – and it would be supremely reckless not to assume this – the risk of attacking North Korean nuclear and missile sites is too great to contemplate, given the possibility of retaliatory strikes against South Korea and Japan, bringing the loss of hundreds of thousands, even millions of lives. As an aside, it is also worth pausing to consider how plausible it is to imagine that the US could commence serious attack planning and preparations, necessarily in concert with its South Korean and Japanese allies, without indicators and warnings becoming discernible to North Korea, either through its own intelligence gathering or a third-party tip-off. If Kim were to perceive any US military preparations in the region as a prelude to a serious attack on his regime, he may pre-empt such an attack by launching a major strike against South Korea and Japan.

Mr Trump might gamble, of course, that the appearance of credible preparations for a military strike might expedite more diplomatic urgency in Beijing, fearing the consequences of regime collapse in Pyongyang. Intensified pressure on the Kim regime might bring it back to the negotiating table, but the risk of miscalculation and miscommunication here is considerable. It would be better for Mr Trump to pursue a less coercive approach to the issue of talks, but even here there could be no guarantee that Kim would then negotiate in good faith. Moreover, even if Kim could be coerced or persuaded into good faith negotiations, his freedom of action may be constrained by

domestic factors. Could the US and China offer Kim enough inducements to make him seriously consider a test moratorium, still less a roll-back, of North Korea's nuclear capabilities? Much would likely depend on the reliability of Kim's hold on power in the event of such a loss of face in his backing away from North Korea's proud, constitutionally-mandated nuclear status. *In extremis*, might North Korean hard-liners execute a *coup d'état* if they perceived Kim to be losing his nerve and capitulating to America?

Mr Trump has plenty of options at the margins: improving defensive and deterrent measures; working to enhance the effectiveness of sanctions; further investment in US national missile defence capabilities; and possibly even intercepting future North Korean missile tests. But these incremental steps would only delay and increase the costs of North Korean nuclear and missile programmes: development and testing would doubtless continue, bringing ever closer the prospect of a reliable, nuclear-armed ICBM deterrent targeting the continent US. The strategic and political unacceptability of such an outcome is what motivates calls for a preventive military response, [as advocated recently by US Senator John McCain](#). Even if North Korea's biological, chemical and nuclear munitions were insufficiently hidden or protected by the regime, it surely cannot be a high confidence assessment that a US preventive strike would eliminate the possibility of a survivable, second-strike capability. In this context, a preventive strike should be regarded as an unacceptably bad choice.

Mr Trump might fail to find the basis for renewed negotiations with Kim Jong-un. In fact, he may not even try particularly hard to find it. He will probably opt for a tougher, less 'patient' iteration of Mr Obama's sanctions and sabotage. Such a strategy would essentially guarantee that North Korea will further improve its nuclear and missile programmes throughout Mr Trump's presidency. With preventive action too costly and negotiations at an impasse, Mr Trump is left with the tripartite approach of containment, nuclear deterrence, and covert action to slow North Korean programmes and try to accelerate regime change. This is far from an ideal situation, but it is where we now are. For all the understandable focus on [the Russia question](#), it is how Mr Trump

handles North Korea that will be the most immediately consequential and defining foreign policy issue of his administration.